

Chapter-III

The Masters

I

Snow started as a novelist by writing an exercise in detective fiction, Death Under Sail (1932). In this piece of undistinguished fiction Snow appears to be finding his way and exploring the possibilities of narrative, with a view to learning his craft. Snow's second exercise in fiction, New Lives for Old (1933), is an attempt to write a conventional kind of realistic novel. In this novel, which is more or less science fiction, his concern with the world of science is clearly expressed. Two of the main characters in the novel are a scientist and a writer. Vanden, the discontented novelist, and, Pilgrim, the scientist at one with himself perhaps, suggest, as Thale points out, 'the famous division of two cultures'.¹ As far as the theme of New Lives for Old is concerned rejuvenation represents technical and scientific progress which has been responsible for the lengthening of life during the last thirty years. Thale points out that "the social and political implications of rejuvenation . . . foreshadow Snow's later discussion of the rich and poor nations [in The Two Cultures]."²¹⁴

It is interesting to learn that Snow published a

slightly revised edition of The Search in 1958, the year of "The Two Cultures" lecture. Snow, it seems, was encouraged to reissue the work because some of his scientist friends told him that the novel showed what science looked like from inside. I.I.Rabi, Nobel Prize Physicist is said to have called it "the one novel which I knew which was really about scientists living as scientists."² The Search was first published in 1934. It is a far better novel than the earlier two exercises and as Thale says, "It gives good many hints of ^{the} direction of Snow's development and ^{the} nature of his later achievement."³ Arthur Miles, the hero of the novel is, a promising scientist, when Audrey, the girl whom he loves, leaves him, he devotes himself to science and to his career as a researcher in biophysics. Later he makes an error in research which costs him his job and ^{he} now realizes two things - one, that he really didn't want to marry Audrey; two, that he is not really interested in science. Then, like his author, that is Snow himself, he takes up the new career as a writer. The Search is primarily a story about a scientist, and Snow depicts a scientist from the inside in an authentic manner. It is also conceived as a ^{about} novel the conflict between the pursuit of scientific truth and the pursuit of a career in science, the latter being a matter of academic politics. William Cooper, however, says that the purpose of the novel is not to

present a scientist "but the whole individual who happens to be a scientist."⁴ Probably Cooper is right, but it is an obvious truth, since a character in a novel has to be an individual and not an allegorical figure standing for an abstraction.

II

The Masters (1951) is the fifth novel in the sequence of Strangers and Brothers. It presents an academic world, consisting of members of both the cultures - the scientific culture and the literary culture. The situation is the impending death of the Master of ^αCambridge College who is seriously ill of inoperable cancer. The novel ends with the death of the master and the election of a new master. As Thale rightly points out, The Masters "presents a microcosm of all power structures."⁵ But, for our purpose, this power dimension is not as important as the interaction of scientists and non-scientists.

To begin with, it is useful to have a clear idea of the plot structure of The Masters and the pattern of characters who are involved in the central action of the novel. Vernon Royce, the Master of the college, who is

a specialist in comparative religion, is dying of cancer. The action, that is the political intrigue regarding the election of the new master, takes place under the very shadow of the impending death of the master. The contestants for the Mastership are: Jago, a senior tutor in English, who belongs to the literary culture, and Crawford, a biologist, twice Fellow of the Royal Society, who is a representative of the other culture, i.e., the scientific culture. Jago has more sympathizers to begin with, but in the end three of the thirteen members of the college change their mind and ultimately Crawford is elected. The main scenes of the drama are enacted in the dining hall and the combination-room of the college and all of them are closely related to the contest. Thus the unity of time, place and action are maintained almost in the Aristotelian sense.

There are four scientists who, more or less, represent one side of the cultural divide. They are: Walter Luke, aged twenty four, a nuclear scientist, a newly elected Fellow; Crawford, a biologist, and twice Fellow of the Royal Society; Francis Getliffe, aged thirty four, who is a physicist, and Nightingale aged forty three, a frustrated chemical scientist. Despard-Smith, aged seventy, who is a mathematician but who has

left mathematics at the age of thirty to become bursar of the college, ^{standing} may be taken as a person _{some-where} in between the two cultures. The remaining eight belong to the literary culture and hence most of complexities of the human character are to be found in them: Paul Jago, aged fifty, an English scholar ^{and} Senior Tutor for the last ten years, Roy Calvert, aged thirty four, who is an orientalist; Pilbrow, aged seventy four, who is a liberal man of letters; M.H.L. Gay, aged eighty, who is an eccentric scholar in Icelandic sagas; Arthur Brown, aged forty six, historian, and Charles Chrystal, aged forty eight, who is a classic and Dean of the college - both of whom are the politicians of the college community.

Let us first take the group of the scientists and examine how far they answer the statements made about them in The Two Cultures. Snow makes a distinction between the older scientists and the younger ones, the latter being generally radical in their views and Left in politics, more concerned with the future than with the past. "Almost all scientists," Snow asserts, "form their own judgements on the moral life," though, "their imaginative understanding is less than it could be."⁶ Luke, the young hardworking scientist, is a leftist and an individualist, and once he makes up his mind about

who he is going to vote for, he never changes his mind. Similarly Francis Getliffe, the physicist, a little older than Luke, is liberal in attitude, and he, too, having decided to vote for Crawford, a scientist with radical views, sticks to his decision to the last. Both Luke and Getliffe answer to the generic description of the scientist that Snow gives in his Two Cultures. Crawford, a biologist, is described as a man of no feeling and little imagination, but with his radical views he has the future in his bones. That is the reason why in spite of all political intrigues Crawford wins the election and becomes the new master of the college. Though Lewis Eliot, the narrator, who belongs to the discipline of academic law, does not want Crawford to win because he thinks he is inhuman, it appears from the turn of events that puts Crawford at the top that C.P. Snow himself, a scientist turned writer, wanted the scientist Crawford to win. It is interesting to see the tension between plot and the narrative, the plot being structured by the novelist and the narrative being presented by the narrator, Lewis Eliot.

There are, however, two scientists who are frustrated in their work and, therefore they have become uncreative and consequently embittered and sometimes

self-seeking and wicked. Nightingale, aged forty three, who was once a good chemical scientist and made a name at the age of twenty three, is now a frustrated scientist with no academic distinction to his credit. He supports Jago because Jago might give him a tutor's post but when Jago doesn't promise to give him that post he changes his mind and votes for Crafword. Nightingale's moral depravity is caused by his frustration as an academician:

"Nightingale is a man drawn into himself. suspicion and envy lived in him. . . . But he had been unlucky, he had been frustrated in his most cherished hope, and now envy never left him alone."⁷

When he was young he had shown a spark of real talent as one of the earliest theoretical chemists who worked on molecular structure, but "the spark went out",⁸ the years passed, often he had new conceptions, but the power to execute them had escaped him. The narrator further says that Nightingale^{was} always pestered with envy. "He longed in compensation for every job within reach, in reason, and out of reason . . . Each job in the college for which he was passed over, he saw with intense suspicion as a sign of the conspiracy



directed against him."⁹ This is a perceptive analysis of a talent which has dried up.

There is another frustrated scientist, Despard-Smith, an old time wrangler, who left mathematics to become bursar:

"He did no ~~know~~ more mathematics but became bursar at thirty and didn't leave go of the office until he was over sixty. He was a narrow, competent man, who had saved money for the college like a French peasant, and at any attempts to spend, predicted the gravest catastrophe. . . . At seventy he still kept a curious, brittle, stiff authority"¹⁰

In the thesis of The Two Cultures Snow speaks of the scientists but not of the frustrated scientists. In his fiction he treats the scientists as human beings and presents them in their many dimensions. He is particularly perceptive in his analysis of frustrated and consequently uncreative scientists who develop a bitter and envious attitude to life and become sometimes wicked and destructive. Nightingale, for instance, tries to defame Jago's wife in his attempt to see that Jago fails in the election.

Coming to the characters who cluster round the other pole of traditional culture, we must say that most of them are a slightly complex individuals. Paul Jago who is depicted at some length in the novel is the most complex person in the novel. He is described as extremely mercurial in nature:

"...no one's face changed its expression quicker, and his smile was brilliant. Behind the thick lenses, his eyes were small and intensely bright, the eyes of a young and lively man. . . . His temper was as thick as his smile; in everything he did his nerves seemed on the surface. . . his sympathy and emotion flowed too easily. . . Yet they [people who met him] were affected by the depth of his feelings. . . . he was not only a man of deep feeling but also one of passionate pride."¹¹

Lewis Eliot, the narrator, who is himself a member of the 'literary culture' understands Jago from the inside and is able to depict him from the inside. He can make subtle statements like the following about Jago:

"Sometimes he was quite naked to life, I thought; sometimes he concealed himself from his own eyes".¹²

Jago is an interesting man to be with, and women had a fascination for him, which Crawford, the scientist and his antagonist, is envious of:

Jago had never been frightened that he might not win love: he had always known, with the unconscious certainty of an attractive man, that it would come his way . . . he stayed confident with women, he was confident of love. . . . Whereas Crawford as a young man had wondered in anguish whether any woman would ever love him. For all his contented marriage - on the surface so much more enviable than Jago's - he had never lost that diffidence, and there were still times when he envied such men as Jago from the bottom of the heart.¹³

Jago is so subtle and sophisticated ^{that} when Crawford wins the election he is the first one to congratulate him and invite him for dinner.

Roy Calvert the orientalist is a leftist in politics and supports Jago right from the beginning. With his hobby of military history he takes the election as a military exercise. It is Pilbrow who is a liberal

man of letters who changes sides in the course of the novel from Jago to Crawford and tilts the balance. He comes from the upper-middle class and as such he is ^{an} eccentric amateur, a connoisseur; he spent much of his time abroad but he is intensely English, but he could not have been anything else but English. He belonged to the fine flower of the peaceful 19th century."¹⁴

M.H.L.Gay, aged eighty, is also a vain eccentric professor who is interested in Icelandic sagas. He has still 19th century views about university educational system. He says, "I never attached an importance to boundry  lines between branches of learning. A man can do distinguished work in any and we ought to have outgrown these arts and science controversies before we leave the school debating society. Indeed we ought."¹⁵ Of course he is on the side of Jago.

Brown the historian is a born politician. Brown is bent upon getting Jago elected because he admires Jago immensely. Chrystal, his friend, is undecided about Jago for personal reasons but Brown draws him in with patience and perseverance. It is Chrystal, however, who changes his mind ^{the} last minute and votes for Crawford, who wins by seven to six.

“He had never been fond of Jago, had never liked to think of him as Master, had only joined in to please Arthur Brown. Then, liking the feel of power, he had tried to find ways out. . . Was he right in sacrificing his judgement, just to please Brown? . . .”¹⁶

Snow demonstrates how the members of the literary culture are extremely interesting ^{and} lively but they are essentially emotional, subjective and more or less eccentric. The only person who comes out as ^a perceptive insightful man with a sense of loyalty and vision is the narrator himself, i.e. Lewis Eliot.

C.P. Snow who was a denizen of both the cultures has a profound insight into the nature of misunderstanding between the scientists and the non-scientists. There is an interesting passage in the novel which illustrates this misunderstanding very clearly: Francis Getliffe, a scientist, with radical views is of the opinion that the future of the college will be ^{safe} in the hands of the scientist. The narrator who belongs to the humanistic culture has the following conversation with Francis Getliffe:

'Whom do you want?' I asked.

'The obvious man. Crawford.'

'He's conceited. He's shallow. He's a third-rate man.'

'He's a very good scientist. That's understanding the case.' . . .¹⁷

This demonstrates how there is an element of mutual incomprehension among the scientists and humanists in the evaluation of Crawford and Jago. Similarly, the dying master, who belongs to the literary culture, has a prejudice of a life time against scientists. When he comes to know that Crawford is one of the candidates, he blurts out: 'Crawford, Scientists are too bumptious.'¹⁸ He is, of course, on the side of Jago though he knows his limitations: 'I hope you get Jago in,' he said. 'He'll never become wise, of course. He'll always be a bit of an ass. Forget that, and get him in.'¹⁹

The whole novel is full of many such misunderstandings and misinterpretations that exist between scientists and non-scientists, though quite a number of them may be attributed to the normal kind of incomprehension that exist between any two individuals. But it is possible to argue on the basis of examples like the above that Snow is painfully aware of the difference in attitudes, patterns of behaviour, approaches and assumptions, and that is why he presents a

generalization about the scientists' nature in The Two Cultures. In this novel the scientists, particularly young scientists, are generally men of radical views and Leftists in politics. Later in The Two Cultures Snow generalises upon this and makes a statement that statistically 'slightly more scientists are leftists in open politics.' In the novel most of the scientists are concerned with the development of science and the future of the college in the new context of science and technology. This observation leads Snow to make a generalization in The Two Cultures that the scientists generally operate 'with ^{the} future in their bones.'²⁰ In the novel it is the fellows who belong to the literary culture who are traditional, conservative and less concerned about the future than those belonging to the scientific culture. This view also gets crystallised in The Two Cultures:

"The feelings of one pole become the anti-feelings of the other. If the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist."²¹

Snow wrote this novel much before he formulated his thesis of The Two Cultures, but it is easy to see

that in this novel he was moving towards his thesis, though the thesis is much simpler than the novel in the exploration of the two cultures. Novel-writing is a way of thinking in a multi-dimensional way in the context of the complexities of concrete human life. The novel, therefore, is generally superior to a thesis like The Two Cultures which is full of simplifications and generalisations. It is true that the knowledge of The Two Cultures helps us to understand the characters of The Masters a little better, but it is equally true that the novel gives an inside knowledge of the scientists and non-scientists in a concrete human situation of a Cambridge College in which they often meet in dining-halls and combination-rooms. "It was one of the odd features of a college," the narrator says. "I sometimes thought that one lived in social intimacy with men one disliked."²² It is this atmosphere that generates the inevitable political intrigue that often pervades academic institutions. Since The Masters is not governed by the thesis that he formulated later, it has a galaxy of characters who are individualised in such a manner that we seem to know them personally. It is the next novel, The New Men (1954) that appears to be dominated by his newly formulated thesis of The Two Cultures.

Notes and References

1. Thale, p.11.
2. Davis, pp.10-11.
3. Op.cit., see, p.11.
4. Op.cit., see, p.14.
5. Op.cit., see, p.38.
6. Two Cultures, pp. 39-40.
7. C.P.Snow, The Masters, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, 1969, p.47.
8. Ibid., p.47.
9. Ibid., p.47.
10. Ibid., p.75.
11. Ibid., p.12.
12. Ibid., p.16.
13. Ibid., pp.86-87.
14. Ibid., p.66.
15. Ibid., p.240.
16. Ibid., p.273.
17. Ibid., pp.70-71.
18. Ibid., p.170.
19. Ibid., p.170.
20. Ibid., p.10.
21. Ibid., p.11.
22. Ibid., p.45.